

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY BANGUI PRIORITY

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TAGS: PDIP, CT, US

SUBJECT: CORONATION AND U.S. MEDIA - CONTINUED.

1. J. REGAN KERNEY ARTICLE ON CORONATION CARRIED PAGE
A24 DECEMBER 7 WASHINGTON POST. ARTICLE FOLLOWS FOR
POST'S INFO:

QUOTE: QUESTIONS REMAIN IN BANGUI AFTER THE CORONATION
GLITTER -- BANGUI, CENTRAL AFRICAN EMPIRE - IT TOOK 60
SPARKLING NEW MERCEDES BENZ LIMOUSINES, SIX OF THEM WORTH
MORE THAN DOLLARS 80,000 EACH.

NEARLY 100 NEW PEUGEOT 504S, HUNDREDS OF YARDS OF VELVET
AND RED CARPET, AND THOUSANDS OF BOTTLES OF WINE,
CHAMPAGNE AND LIQUOR.

ADD A TON AND A HALF OF FIREWORKS, AND YOU HAVE A
CORONATION IN THE MIDDLE OF AFRICA.

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NOBODY REALLY KNOWS WHAT IT COST TO CROWN JEAN-BEDEL
BOKASSA EMPEROR OF THIS LANDLOCKED, SPARSELY POPULATED
AND IMPOVERISHED FORMER FRENCH COLONY ON SUNDAY, BUT
RUMORS FLEW AROUND AT ABOUT THE SAME CONFUSING RATE AS THE
100 IMPERIAL MOTORCYCLE POLICE DID ON THEIR NEW BMW 800S
ESCORTING NEARLY EVERYBODY, INCLUDING EACH OTHER, AT
FULL SIREN THROUGH THE DOZEN OR SO MILES OF PAVED ROAD

IN GREATER DOWNTOWN BANGUI.

CLEARLY, THE PRICE WAS MANY MILLIONS OF DOLLARS. IT COST, FOR INSTANCE, DOLLARS 5,000 EXTRA PER MERCEDES JUST TO SHIP THE CARS BY AIR FROM THE COAST OF CAMEROON TO THIS LAZY CITY OF 300,000 THAT STRADDLES A BEND OF THE OUBANGUI RIVER.

IS IT TRUE THE EMPEROR WHO IS KNOWN TO LIKE A DRINK, ABSTAINED ALL WEEKEND? WAS IDI AMIN REALLY DISCOURAGED FROM COMING BECAUSE BOKASSA FEARED AMIN MIGHT ECLIPSE HIM?

EVERYBODY HAS DIFFERENT ANSWERS. WORD HAS IT THAT BOKASSA INVITED 125 HEADS OF STATE. TWO SHOWED UP.

CLOSE FRIEND MOBUTU SESE SEKO OF ZAIRE BEGGED OFF BECAUSE HE HAD HIS OWN INAUGURATION MONDAY, BUT THE TIMING WAS SUSPECT. BOKASSA'S CORONATION DATE HAS LONG BEEN KNOWN. MOBUTU ANNOUNCED THE DATES OF HIS ELECTION AND INAUGURATION TWO WEEKS AGO.

TANZANIA AND KENYA OPENLY SNUBBED THE CORONATION. SOUTH AFRICA AND ISRAEL SENT OFFICIAL REPRESENTATIVES.

IT SOMETIMES SEEMED MORE OF AN AMUSEMENT THAN AN EMBARRASSMENT TO AFRICANS. A MAN IN CAMEROON ASKED SEVERAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CORRESPONDENTS WHY THEY WERE GOING TO BANGUI. "FOR THE CORONATION," ONE REPLIED, AND THE MAN DOUBLED OVER, ROARING WITH LAUGHTER.

AS FOR THE CORRESPONDENTS, THERE WAS ALWAYS THE FEAR THAT THEY WOULD BE TURNED AWAY AT THE AIRPORT, GIVEN THE EMPEROR'S JAILING AND HARSH TREATMENT OF TWO WESTERN REPORTERS LAST SUMMER.

THE STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALLY DISCOURAGED CORRESPONDENTS FROM ARRIVING WITHOUT AN INVITATION AND SAID ONE HAD ALREADY BEEN TURNED AWAY.

AS IT TRANSPIRED, EVERYBODY WAS WELCOME. AN AMERICAN WHO HAD SUPPOSEDLY BEEN TURNED AWAY WAS NOT A CORRESPONDENT, AND WAS NOT KICKED OUT ANYWAY. NEVERTHELESS, THIS STORY WAS FILED FROM OUTSIDE THE CENTRAL AFRICAN EMPIRE TO AVOID THE POSSIBILITY OF PROBLEMS LIKE THOSE ENCOUNTERED BY THE TWO REPORTERS LAST SUMMER.

AMERICANS WERE NOT ALONE IN THEIR UNCERTAINTY. THREE BRITISH NEWSMEN AND A SWEDE ARRIVED FROM NAIROBI WITH

MORNING COATS AND GREAT TOP HATS, HAVING BEEN ASSURED IT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO GET CLOSE TO AN EMPEROR WHOSE ADMIRATION FOR NAPOLEON IS SO GREAT THAT HIS MOUNTED IMPERIAL GUARD LOOKS AS IF IT HAS JUST LEFT THE SET OF "WAR AND PEACE".

PREPARATIONS TOOK SIX MONTHS AND TIED UP EVERY CABINET MEMBER WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE BEEN RUNNING THE COUNTRY. AMONG THE DETAILS: BANGUI'S TRAFFIC LIGHTS, WHICH HAD NEVER WORKED, FINALLY LIT UP. LOCAL DRIVERS, WHO WERE UNUSED TO THEM, SIMPLY IGNORED THEM.

AT THE SUNDAY NIGHT BALL, AFTER THE CORONATION, SCORES OF GUESTS HAD TO SERVE THEMSELVES WHEN A CREW OF WAIT-LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ERS VANISHED ALONG WITH SEVERAL CASES OF WINE AND WHISKEY.

THE 25-MINUTE FIREWORKS DISPLAY WAS TOPNOTCH BUT BECAUSE OF POOR PLANNING, THE SOMETIMES SEARING FALL-OUT DROPPED ON TABLES WHERE THE GUESTS WERE EATING.

AND THERE WERE MISUNDERSTANDINGS. THE PRESS WAS TOLD IT COULD DO ANYTHING EXCEPT TAKE PICTURES MILITARY INSTALLATIONS AND THE OIL REFINERY. CURIOUS REPORTERS SET OUT TO FIND THE HITHERTO UNKNOWN REFINERY-WHICH TURNED OUT TO BE A PEANUT PROCESSING PLANT.

"IT WAS A VERY BEAUTIFUL CORONATION," A YOUNG WOMAN ANSWERED WHEN ASKED HOW SHE LIKED THE EMPEROR.

"IT WAS VERY WARM TODAY," REPLIED A GENDARME WHEN ASKED WHAT HE THOUGHT OF THE CORONATION.

ONLY ABOUT 10,000 WERE ON HAND FOR THE SUNDAY CORONATION, ALTHOUGH SEVERAL THOUSAND MORE SHOWED UP FOR THE OFFICIAL PARADE MONDAY DOWN BOKASSA AVENUE, THE BROAD BOULEVARD WITH THE MASSIVE CENTER STRIPE REVEALING THE FACT THAT IT WAS ONCE THE MAIN RUNWAY AT THE CITY AIRPORT.

VIRTUALLY THE ENTIRE ARMY MARCHED, ALL 1,500 MEN-EACH CLEARLY IN PAIN IN A PAIR OF NEW BOOTS. A CHINESE DELEGATE WAS TALLYING UP THE COUNTRY'S MILITARY STRENGTH, WHILE A SOVIET DELEGATE SNEERED, "SEE WHAT KIND OF WORK THEY DO AT THE CHINESE MISSION?" UNQUOTE. CHRISTOPHER

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